

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter explains what this document is, why it was prepared, and what it contains.

1.1 Purpose and Need of the Proposed Action

The National Park Service (NPS) is proposing to construct park support facilities on the recently acquired Westervelt-DiNapoli-Lecher property, near Weir Farm National Historic Site (NHS) in Ridgefield, Connecticut (see Figure 1-1). The support facilities would include a new maintenance/curatorial facility and an administrative facility, which would be created by renovating the Westervelt House.

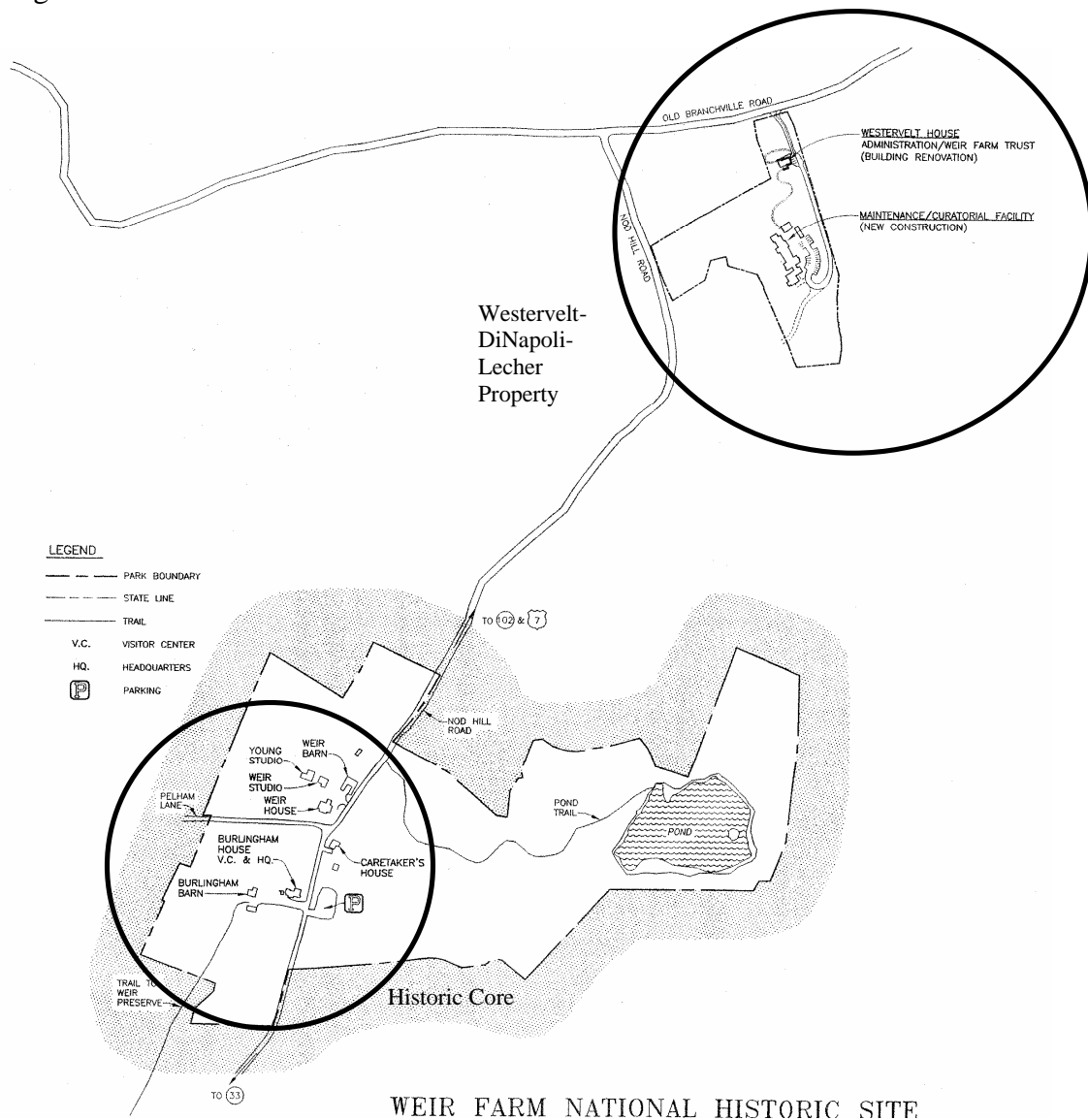


Figure 1-1 Location of the Proposed Action

Weir Farm currently has a collection of approximately 203,000 objects, which range from fine art to farm tools. Currently, the majority of these items are stored at a leased space in an old wire mill, managed by the Georgetown Land Development Company, in Georgetown, Connecticut, approximately 3 miles from the Park. The remainder of the objects are displayed or stored in the Burlingham House (visitor center), Weir House, Weir and Young Studios, or the Weir Barn in the Historic Core area of Weir Farm. Neither the Historic Core buildings nor the wire mill have storage conditions that comply with NPS museum standards as required in NPS Director's Order (DO) #24, *NPS Museum Collections Management*, such as security, climate, and fire suppression. An appropriate museum support facility that meets NPS standards for storage is needed. According to the Park's GMP, museum quality environmental controls necessary to preserve collections of furnishings and art in the main house, Weir Studio, and Young Studio cannot be installed without compromising the fabric, structure, and appearance of these historic buildings (the Historic Core of the Park) (NPS, 1995). The proposed curatorial facilities would house current and future donor collections under museum standard conditions.

At present, large equipment (such as wood working tools), Park vehicles, and maintenance staff are located at the wire mill in Georgetown. This separation of the majority of maintenance equipment and staff from Park grounds is causing maintenance operations to be less efficient. Seasonal landscaping equipment and general small maintenance equipment are stored in the Historic Core area of Weir Farm, in buildings considered important to the Weir, J. Alden, Farm Historic District. Storage equipment in these buildings is resulting in unnecessary wear and tear, and does not allow the structures to be used for their intended function or interpreted for visitor programs.

During the winter, NPS brings snow removal equipment from storage at the wire mill to the buildings in the Historic Core, and stores summer landscaping equipment at the off-site facility. In summer, NPS again rotates its equipment. This increases traffic in and around the Weir Farm NHS, which poses risks to visitor safety. Currently, touring Weir Farm requires crossing both Nod Hill Road and Pelham Lane (NPS, 1995). Centralizing maintenance equipment would improve access to the equipment, visitor safety, and the efficiency of maintenance operations.

Currently, the Weir Farm Trust and the NPS administrative and visitor service staff are housed in the Burlingham House in the Historic Core area (see Figure 1-2). The NPS proposes to renovate the Westervelt House, which is located on the recently acquired land, and move the Weir Farm Trust and the NPS administrative staff there. This would free the Burlingham House for use of the Artists in Residence Program (see text box on next page) in keeping with a goal outlined in the *Weir Farm National Historic Site General Management Plan* (GMP) and accompanying Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Weir Farm NHS (NPS, 1995).



Figure 1-2 Burlingham House

Weir Farm Trust Artists in Residence Program

The Weir Farm Trust invites visual artists to apply to the Artists in Residence Program at the Weir Farm NHS. This program gives selected artists the opportunity to create a cohesive body of work based on personal experiences at Weir Farm. The artists are also given access to the Weir Farm's outstanding archives for research on the historical, cultural, and physical features of the Weir Farm (NPS, Undated).

The GMP/EIS addresses the Artists in Residence Program as an element that "...perpetuates the site's long and unbroken tradition by providing programs and facilities for ongoing artistic activity." The tradition of having artists live at the Farm and draw inspiration from its landscape dates back to 1882, when Weir invited accomplished artists to live and work at the Farm, as part of his lifelong commitment to teaching and nurturing other artists. Thus, the Artist in Residence Program is central to Weir Farm as a historic site because it preserves and continues the tradition of creative response to the site, and maintaining a vital artistic tradition at the site is a priority for Weir Farm managers. The GMP addresses the need for providing both housing and studio space, with the plan of having artists reside in the Burlingham House and work in an expanded caretaker's garage/barn (NPS, 1995).

1.2 The Environmental Assessment and Its Function

This Environmental Assessment (EA)/Assessment of Effect documents the results of a study of the potential environmental impacts of constructing a new maintenance/curatorial facility and renovating the Westervelt House as an administrative facility at Weir Farm NHS. The NPS is responsible for the preparation of this EA/Assessment of Effect, in compliance with:

- The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 (42 United States Code (USC) 4321 et seq.), which requires an environmental analysis for major Federal actions having the potential to affect the quality of the environment;
- Council of Environmental Quality's (CEQ) regulations for implementing NEPA (40 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 1500 through 1508);
- NPS DO #12 and Handbook, *Conservation Planning, Environmental Impact Analysis, and Decision Making* (NPS, 2001); and
- The National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), as amended.

Key goals of NEPA are to help Federal agency officials make well-informed decisions about agency actions and to provide a role for the general public in the decision-making process. The study and documentation mechanisms associated with NEPA seek to provide decision-makers with sound knowledge of the comparative environmental consequences of the several courses of action

Purposes of an EA

An EA is a brief NEPA document that is prepared to:

- Help determine whether the impact of a proposed action or its alternatives could be significant; and
- Aid the NPS in compliance with NEPA by evaluating a proposal that will have no significant impacts, but may have measurable adverse impacts.

available to them. NEPA studies, and the documents recording their results, such as this EA/Assessment of Effect, focus on providing input to the particular decisions faced by the relevant officials.

In this case, the Superintendent of Weir Farm NHS will recommend to the Regional Director whether to construct a new maintenance and curatorial facility and renovate the Westervelt House as an administrative facility at Weir Farm NHS. The Superintendent will make this recommendation in part based on the results of this EA/Assessment of Effect, the overall management framework already established for Weir Farm, and the legislation guiding the NPS' actions.

In addition, the impact analyses for cultural resources in this EA/Assessment of Effect are intended to comply with the requirements of both NEPA and Section 106 of the NHPA. In accordance with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation's (ACHP) regulations implementing Section 106 of the NHPA (36 CFR Part 800, *Protection of Historic Properties*), impacts to historic structures, cultural landscapes, and museum collections were identified and evaluated by (1) determining the area of potential effects; (2) identifying cultural resources present in the area of potential effects that were either listed in or eligible to be listed in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP); (3) applying the criteria of adverse effect to affected cultural resources either listed in or eligible to be listed in the NRHP; and (4) considering ways to avoid, minimize, or mitigate adverse effects.

1.3 Purpose and Significance of the Park

The Weir Farm NHS was established by Congress under the Public Law 101-485, 104 stat. 1171 (also known as the Weir Farm National Historic Site Establishment Act of 1990) on October 31, 1990 to preserve the life and work of landscape artist J. Alden Weir (1852-1919), one of the founders of the impressionist tradition in American Art. As described in the enabling legislation, the threefold purpose of Weir Farm is to:

1. Preserve a significant site associated with the tradition of American Impressionism;
2. Maintain the integrity of a setting that inspired artistic expression; and
3. Offer opportunities for the inspirational benefit and education of the American people.

Weir Farm is one of only two sites within the national park system that focus primarily on art and it is the only park unit in the State of Connecticut (NPS, 1995).

Under the terms established by Congress, the NPS, and the Weir Farm Trust are charged with preserving the site and maintaining "the integrity of a setting that inspired artistic expression." The private non-profit Weir Farm Trust, founded in 1989, is the NPS' primary partner in planning for Weir Farm and in developing visitor programs. The Trust was the interim manager of the Weir Farm property from October 1990, when the property was designated a National Historic Trust, until January 1992, when the NPS staff arrived. The Trust continues to function at the site through a cooperative agreement with the NPS.

In 1995, the NPS issued Weir Farm's GMP and accompanying EIS. Its purpose was to define the management philosophy that would guide NPS management decisions on the site. The GMP and the associated EIS set out the dual goals of preserving the integrity of the Weir Farm as a "work of art" where three generations of artists worked and lived. The goal in the GMP is to avoid altering the current appearance of the landscape and the structures of the "Historic Core" (see Figure 1-3). Keeping the landscape and structures as they are captures the artistic legacy that is preserved throughout the site. The Farm is one of the few intact reminders of an important nineteenth century artistic milieu. Preserving the site intact would provide a rare opportunity to see this nearly untouched landscape as the artists saw it.



Figure 1-3 Historic Core of Weir Farm

1.4 Project Location

The Historic Core of the Weir Farm NHS is located in southwestern Connecticut. The site is located in a part of the towns of Ridgefield and Wilton known as Branchville in Fairfield County. Weir Farm NHS (60 acres) is one component of a network of nearly 300 acres of contiguous open space. To the southwest, the Nature Conservancy currently operates the 113-acre Weir-Leary-White Preserve. To the northeast, the Town of Ridgefield owns approximately 33 acres of conservation land, and the Connecticut Department of Transportation owns approximately 86 acres. The site's northwestern and southeastern boundaries are rimmed by



Figure 1-4. Westervelt House

residential development. The location of Weir Farm and adjacent conservation land and open space are shown in Figure 1-5.

The historic buildings and landscape was a functioning farm prior to Weir's purchase of the farm in 1882. Today, of the 245 acres eventually acquired by Weir between 1882 and 1907, only about 60 acres remain. The house, studios, and grounds are remarkably unchanged in this area, which is referred to as the Historic Core.

In 2000, the NPS acquired two parcels of land, totaling nine acres, northeast and about one-half of a mile from the Historic Core. The Westervelt House (see Figure 1-4), an unoccupied residence, was on the acquired land (NPS, 2003b). The Westervelt House and the area for the proposed curatorial and maintenance facility are shown in Figure 1-1.